Sex-Role Identification of Normal Adolescent Males and Females as Related to School Achievement

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The historical view of masculinity/femininity posited essentially bipolar opposites, with the presence of one set of characteristics precluding the other. More recent studies of sex-role stereotypes have defined sexual orientation within clusters of socially desirable attributes which males and females perceive as differentiating males from females. This view negates the contention that psychological sex roles are composed of bipolar opposites, and concludes that the constructs of masculinity and femininity are independent dimensions rather than a single bipolar dimension. Little is known about the sex-role functioning of adolescents, yet it is during adolescence that qualitative shifts occur in interpersonal relationships and concurrent changes occur in cognitive functioning, with adolescents shifting toward hypothetical thinking and abstract ideal notions. In view of these changes, much can be learned about adult functioning by studying the sex-role perceptions of adolescents related to familial and social variables. This study examines the sex-role perceptions that adolescents hold of fathers, mothers, ideal males, ideal females, and selves. Differences exist between male and female adolescents, and significant linkages exist between sex-role identification and academic achievement.

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INTRODUCTION

Developmental and personality theorists have traditionally considered the establishment of an exclusive sex-role identification—masculinity for boys and femininity for girls—as a major developmental task of adolescence (Erikson, 1950; Freud, 1937; Sanford, 1955; Bandura, 1965; Kohlberg, 1966; Mussen, 1969).

Recent research has described this acquisition of sex-role orientation as along independent dimensions, rather than a single bipolar dimension as historically held (Bem, 1974; Broverman et al., 1972; Spence and Helmreich, 1978); such conceptualizations allow that the developmental process continues until a traditional sex-role identity is transcended and an identity composed of the positive qualities associated with both masculinity and femininity is formed (Block, 1973; Hefner et al., 1975).

One purpose of studying the sex-role identification of adolescents is to obtain a better understanding of the attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions acquired during this period, and examine their relationship to later psychological adjustment. Studies have linked difficulties in sex-role orientation with severe psychopathology (Holzberg, 1963; McClelland and Watt, 1968; Rosenfeld, 1966; Small et al., 1979; Zeichner, 1955) and impaired social adaptation (Bem, 1974; Spence and Helmreich, 1978; Wells, 1980).

Sex-role orientation also appears to be an important variable in academic achievement. Spence and Helmreich (1978) reported that girls' achievement is significantly linked to the relationship they have with their father. Williams (1976) found that girls who identified with fathers perceived as ascendant and dominant were more outgoing, adventurous, and action oriented than girls who identified with mothers perceived as passive. Vierstein and Hogan (1975) studied occupational interest patterns of junior high school students and concluded that girls with high occupational and achievement aspirations had personality profiles similar to their fathers'. Finally, Landy et al. (1969) found that father-absent girls had lower achievement scores in quantitative areas than girls whose fathers had been present during evenings until the girls were 10-years-old.

That boys' and girls' development of achievement patterns differ is suggested by the findings of Raph et al. (1966), who showed that male underachievers outnumber female underachievers in elementary school, but this relationship changes with age, until it is reversed in the college years. Additionally, the relationship between achievement motivation and parental behavior appears to differ according to the sex of the child. Manley (1973) found a suggested positive relationship between maternal warmth and sons' achievement. For daughters, this relationship appears to be more complex. Kagan and Freeman (1967) reported a negative correlation be-